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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature reveals that American Indian women are stereotyped into two roles--Indian princess or Indian squaw. Indian women who reject their culture are considered to be princesses by the dominant culture. Those who remain with their culture are considered to be squaws by the dominant culture. This paper analyzes the portrayal of Indian women in literature by examining three works written by non-Indian authors and three works by Indian authors. The three non-Indian works are: (1) "Pocahontas, or the Nonparell of Virginia," (1933) by David Garnett; (2) "Nancy Ward, Cherokee," (1975) by Harold Felton; and (3) "Sacajawea," (1978) by Anna Lee Waldo. These women found honor among members of the dominant society depending upon how well they fit into the Western European role established for women. The three novels selected by American Indian authors were: (1) "Ceremony," (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko; (2) "The Woman Who Owned the Shadows," (1983) by Paula Gunn Allen; and (3) "Love Medicine," (1984) by Louise Erdrich. These novels demonstrate the ability of Indian women to survive under adversity. It is stated that the image of Native American women has been dictated by the Western European male to suit his cultural understanding and desire for dominance. Until the Native American women overturn the shallow stereotypes that have served as their image, their voice will be lost in the continuing history of a people. (SM)

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AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN IN LITERATURE: STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERIZATIONS OF INSUFFICIENT SELF-DETERMINATION

by

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AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN IN LITERATURE: STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERISATIONS OF INSUFFICIENT SELF-DETERMINATION

Margaret E. Galloway

In preparation for my research, a review of the literature portraying Native American women revealed that the female characters fell into one of two prominent stereotypical roles or guises: Indian princess, or Indian squaw. While Bylar and Mickinock indicate that they do not necessarily think biased portraits are always calculated, Wittstock, Young, Allen, Dorris, and Hirschfelder, a majority of scholars commenting on such depictions, find an underlying bias to be the basis of the dominant societies' justification for racial and cultural genocide. Such an attitude would ultimately form the rationalisation for the dominant society to blame the victim for being victimized.

The decision was made to select and analyze the portrayal of Indian women in literature by examining three typical works written by non-Indian authors and three works by Indian authors. The three non-Indian works were a very popular novel by David

Garnett, Pocahontas, or the Nonparell of Virginia, 1933; Harold Felton's book for children, Nancy Ward, Cherokee, 1975; and Anna Lee Waldo's paperback historical romance, Sacajawea, 1978. It was anticipated that the non-Indian works would utilize rhetorical techniques and historical terminology designed to bring vivid mental images to the mind of the reader. There was no particular expectation that these three authors would be interested in Indian perceptions or Indian causes. Interestingly enough, all three authors displayed some insight into the insensitive and, frequently, inhumane ways in which the dominant culture treated the Indian. The two works written in the late 1970s display a sensitivity brought about primarily by the consiousness-raising activities of the equal rights movements of Blacks and feminists.

The three Indian women portrayed in this selected literature were individuals well-known to the average American through history and through the desire of the dominant culture to "adopt" them as supporters of the Anglo-culture. Pocahontas, Nancy Ward, and Sacajawea have a long list of novels, dramas, short stories, songs, poems, and childrens' books spun-off from their original stories. Most non-Indian children and adults would consider all three to be Indian princesses. However, Green implies that the more sexuality the Indian woman displays, the more likely she is to be considered a squaw (703). This is especially true if the Indian woman associates herself with the Anglo male. An example of this type of stereotyping occurs when

Indian women and mountain men formed liaisons. The women were regarded as squaws and their Anglo men were called "squawmen" by the dominant culture which ostracized both. The three Indian women under study all aligned themselves with the Anglo male at some time, and they floated between the squaw and princess images, sometimes within the same sentence, depending upon whether or not they were collaborating with the dominant Western European culture, seeking to follow the new religion, or attempting to establish a high social standing based on preconceived Western European standards. In other words, these women found honor among members of the dominant society dependent upon how well they fit into the Western European role established for women. If they sold out their own culture, they were princesses!

If non-Indian authors utilized standard stereotypical terminology to describe Indian women, how did female Indian authors portray their own kind? The three novels selected were Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony, 1977; Paula Gunn Allen's The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, 1983; and Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine, 1984. These novels by well-known Indian authoresses were reviewed to elicit a current and supportive image of the Indian woman. The earliest novel, Ceremony, 1977, centered around a male casualty of World War II in the Pacific. However, a pervasive female environment wove determinedly throughout the story and left strong, secondary images of the women who influenced the young man's life. The strength of the women

portrayed, right or wrong, good or bad, demonstrated the ability to survive as women and as a culture. The author skillfully played off of some of the rhetorical images from the old stereotypes to lead the reader to new understandings of the culture being portrayed. A concern with the novel is the inability of the majority of the Anglo population to appreciate the subtle Indian images or read beyond the "quest adventure" of the young man.

The work published in 1983, The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, is less known and more controversial. The central character is an alienated half-Indian homosexual woman. As might be expected, the subject matter tends to put off a large reading audience almost immediately. In fact, the novel was given little attention other than a compentently written review in the American Indian Quarterly. It is unfortunate that the sexual overtones of the novel should inhibit many from reading this provocative work. This woman is a survivor too, but the image is dark despite the attempt to have the reader believe that the woman has found her way with guidance from the religion and mythology of her Indian heritage. The image portrayed, however, plays right into the hands of the old stereotype squaw with the underlying implications that this individual is of little worth and no importance to anyone.

The novel published in 1984, Love Medicine, won considerable attention and received the National Book Critics Award in 1984 for the best American work of fiction. This book has three

primary female characters and three secondary female characters. The interaction of these women with each other and with the men in their lives forms the basis for a family saga covering some forty-seven years. These women have color, endurance, and strength. They are like many other women in the United States, old or young, Indian or Anglo, who are confronting life the only way they know how. It is tempting to state that all of these women are reflective of the squaw stereotype, but that is a severe injustice to the creative ability of the author, Louise Erdrich, and the insightful way she has of having women from another culture share the common concerns of everyday life that most women experience. This novel is the most fatalistic of the three because it leaves the future of the Indian woman unrevealed and undefined. The only Indian ritual attempted in the work, the giving of the "love medicine," results in an immediate death by strangulation. There is no Indian ritual or mythology to carry these women. They are identified as being Indian only because they say they are and the Anglo culture chooses to think they are.

What then, in all of this work, distinguishes an Indian princess from an Indian squaw? According to Young for an Indian woman to be regarded as a princess, she must totally renounce her family and her culture in favor of the dominant society (413). If she rescues a male of the dominant society and maintains her virtue in the process, she will be considered a princess by the male's society. However, if the Indian woman maintains her

contact with her culture, bears Indian children with an Indian man, and retains her loyalty to her own society, she will be cast invariably as a squaw by the dominant society. The implication is then made that an Indian woman who is bright enough to renounce her native culture is naturally a princess while the Indian woman who retains her cultural connections is a lazy, stupid squaw. This line of reasoning forms the basis for the rationalization of a "manifest destiny" as policy for triumph over the Indians by the dominant society at any cost to the Indian people.

Hirschfelder points out the observed phenomenon that Anglo "children do not play 'blacks and whites,' they only play 'Cowboys and Indians'" (4). She also observes that such "children could tell more about the traditional activities of Indian fathers than Indian mothers . . . [because] the media image of the Indian is predominantly male" (Hirschfelder 13). Paula Gunn Allen states the problem even more succinctly:

> Image casting and image control constitute the central process that American Indian women must come to terms with, for on that control rests our sense of self, our claim to a past and to a future that we define and that we build. Images of Indians in media and educational materials profoundly influence how we act, how we relate to the world and to each other, and how we value ourselves. (Sacred Hoop 192)

Since literature forms a very basic aspect of cultural experience

the depiction of Indian women should be of paramount importance. History has frequently demonstrated that the image of a civilization which survives is the one which has been recorded by the dominant culture. It is of extreme importance for Indian women to provide accurate portrayals of themselves and their cultures and not rely upon the stereotypes of others. As Allen states,

> Literature is one facet of a culture. The significance of literature can best be understood in terms of the culture from which it springs, and the purpose of literature is clear only when the reader understands and accepts the assumptions on which the literature is based. (Sacred Hoop 54)

Thomson's study of propaganda makes it very clear that the novel is an excellent vehicle for undermining or ridiculing a segment of society and reducing its influence and value within and outside of a culture (48). Hirschfelder points out that the portrayal of the Indian, male and female, through literature demonstrates

> . . . a sorry history of oppression towards . . . minorities, expropriates a shallow version of a subordinate, relatively powerless group and promulgates that imagery as valid. (viii)

In the broader context of social psychology, Stewart discusses the need for individuals who victimize others to convince "themselves that the victim was a person they could not possibly

like" (159). When "women and children are involved [then] emphasis is placed on what subhuman beings they are" (Stewart 160). As the competition for economic and natural resources continues, the economic motive joins the social-psychological attitudes to generate additional antagonism. Stewart continues to make his point when he states that

> In the case of the American Indians, the land competition became one of conquest, with the Indians driven out of all their best land and assigned to marginal lands in the form of reservations, leaving them no real economic role to play in the development of the country. (234)

But time and utilization has proven that even marginal land can have its value for bomb test sites, radioactive waste dumps, and hidden mineral resources.

In a continued attempt to rationalize such inhuman behavior, the dominant Anglo society has relied upon the development of stereotypes for all Indians: "Resultant Indian stereotypes were first those of the cruel savage, then of lazy incompetent, who would make no good use of the land even if they retained title to it" (Stewart 235). Being able to blame the victim permitted the dominant society to preserve their image of a just and caring Christian culture. Writers from the dominant culture have persistently portrayed Native Americans as "fragile, regressive, deteriorating entities, teetering on the brink of extinction" according to Dorris (152-53) for the very reason that it met

their imperialistic and expansionist goals and salved their guilty conscience at the same time.

It is obvious that it is easier to salve a chafed conscience if the individuals to be conquered can be shown to be either eager to accept the new culture (the princess) or of such little value to their own society as not even to count within the new culture (the squaw). But, as Ephanie, the central character from The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, states,

> . . . we have a history too. We didn't just
> stand there and have all of this done to us.
> We helped the cause along. We are not victims.
> We are co-creators! (159)

Thomson points out that "there is the blurred and unacceptable distinction, in much of contemporary writing, between communicating facts and projecting ideas and attitudes" (6). And, if the dominant culture controls the general form of communications through a common language with ingrained cultural and literary symbols, the conquered society has limited options for presenting their own unique perspective. Therefore, important stories go untold because the people who live them have no expressed voice. The victors always write the history!

The image of Native American women has been dictated by the Western European male to suit his cultural understanding and desire for dominance. When the influence of the Indian woman is removed from her own culture and discounted within the dominant culture, then her contribution to either society is irretrievably

lost. It really makes little difference to the outcome whether an Indian woman is absorbed by the dominant culture (princess) or eradicated by that culture (squaw). In either case, the Indian woman and the Indian culture are forever lost to their own society. If Indian authors are going to help the Indian female to provide the cohesive force that holds tribal culture together, they must promote those aspects which make the Indian woman unique within her own society. The character of the Indian woman must project a new strength based on clearer tribal identity. To quote Green, "the Native American woman, like all women, needs a definition that stands apart from that of males, red or white. . . . [She] needs to be defined as Indian, in Indian terms" (714).

Until the Native American women of all tribes can overturn the shallow stereotypes which have so long served as their image, they will be disenfranchised and their voice will be lost in the continuing history of a people. Indian women must demand that Indian authors, as well as authors of the dominant society, portray them with sensitivity and insight in both historical and current cultural roles. It is time to put the stereotypes of Indian princess and Indian squaw to rest.

The contents of this paper were delivered at the Tenth Annual American Indian Conference, Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota, May 7, 1987.

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